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IN THE DEEP OF THE SNOW

CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

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In the Deep of the Snow

The first met the full sweep of his axe

In the Deep of the Snow

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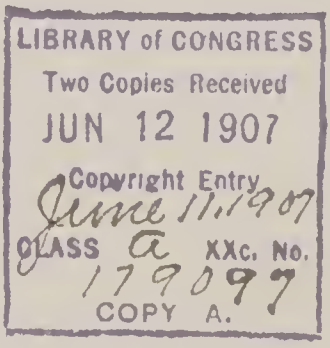

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I

In the Deep of the Snow

I

AROUND the little log cabin in the clearing the snow lay nearly four feet deep. It loaded the roof. It buried the low, broad, log barn almost to the eaves. It whitely fenced in the trodden, chip-littered, straw-strewn space of the yard, which lay between the barn and the cabin. It heaped itself fantastically, in mounds and domes and pillars, over the stumps that dotted the raw, young clearing. It clung densely on the drooping branches of the fir and spruce and hemlock. It mantled in a kind of

breathless, expectant silence the solitude of the wilderness world.

Dave Patton, pushing down the blankets and the many-colored patchwork quilt, lifted himself on one elbow, and looked at the pale face of his young wife. She was sleeping. He slipped noiselessly out of the bunk, lightly pulled up the coverings again, and hurriedly drew on two pairs of heavy, home-knit socks of rough wool. The cabin was filled with the gray light of earliest dawn, and with a biting cold that made the woodsman's hardy fingers ache. Stepping softly as a cat over the rough plank floor, he made haste to pile the cooking-stove with birch-bark, kindling, and split sticks of dry, hard wood. At the touch of the match the birch-

bark caught and curled with a crisp crackling, and with a roar in the strong draft the cunningly piled mass burst into blaze. Dave Patton straightened, and his gray eyes turned to a little, low bunk with high sides in the further corner of the cabin.

Peering over the edge of the bunk with big, eager blue eyes was a round little face framed in a tousled mop of yellow hair. A red glare from the open draft of the stove caught the child's face. The moment she saw her father looking at her she started to climb out of the bunk ; but Dave was instantly at her side, kissing her, and tucking her down again into the blankets.

"You must n't git out o' bed, sweetie," he whispered, "till the

house gits warmed up a bit. An' don't wake mother yet."

The child's eyes danced with eagerness, but she restrained her voice as she replied.

"I thought mebbe 't was Christmis, popsie!" she whispered, clutching his fingers. "'T first I thought mebbe you was Sandy Claus, popsie. Oh, I wisht Christmis 'ld hurry up!"

A look of pain passed over Dave Patton's face.

"Christmas won't be along fer 'most a week yit, sweetie!" he answered, in the soft undertone that took heed of his wife's slumbers. "An' anyways, how do you s'pose Sandy Claus is goin' to find his way, 'way out into these great woods, through all this snow?"

"Oh, *popsie!*" cried the child excitedly. Then, remembering, she lowered her voice again to a whisper. "Don't you know Sandy Claus kin go *any*wheres? Snow, an' cold, an' the—the—big black woods—they don't bother *him* one little, teenty mite. He knows where to find me out here, jest 's easy 's in at the Settlements, popsie!"

The mother stirred in her bunk, wakened by the little one's voice. She sat up, shivering, and pulled a red shawl about her shoulders. Her eyes sought Dave's significantly and sympathetically.

"Mother's girl must try an' not think so much about Sandy Claus," she pleaded. "I don't want her to go an' be disappointed. Sandy Claus lives in at the Settlements,

an' you know right well, girlie, he couldn't git 'way out here, Christmas eve, without neglecting all the little boys an' girls at the Settlements. You wouldn't want *them all* disappointed, just so's he could come to our little girl 'way off here in the woods, what's got her father an' mother anyways!"

The child sat up straight in her bunk, her eyes grew very wide and filled with tears, and her lips quivered. This was the first really effective blow that her faith in Christmas and in Santa Claus had ever received. But instantly her faith recovered itself. The eager light returned to her face, and she shook her yellow head obstinately.

"He won't *have to* 'lect the childern in the Settlements, will he,

popsie?" she cried, And without waiting for an answer, she went on: "He kin be everywheres to oncet, Sandy Claus can. He's so good an' kind he won't forget *one* of the little boys an' girls in the Settlements, nor me, out here in the woods. Oh, mumsie, I wisht it was to-night was Christmis eve!" And in her happy anticipation she bounced up and down in the bunk, a figure of fairy joy in her blue flannel nightgown.

Dave turned away with a heavy heart, and jammed more wood into the stove. Then, pulling on his thick cowhide "larrigans," coat, and woollen mittens, he went out to fodder the cattle. With that joyous roar of fresh flame in the stove the cabin was already warm-

ing up, but outside the door, which Dave closed quickly behind him, the cold had a kind of still savagery, edged and instant like a knife. To a strong man, however, it was tonic and honest, challenging to resistance. In spite of his sad preoccupation, Dave responded to the cold air instinctively, pausing outside the door to fill his deep lungs and to glance at the thrilling mystery of the sunrise before him.

The cabin stood at the top of the clearing, against a background of dense spruce forest, which sheltered it on the north and northeast. Across the yard, on the western side of the cabin, the log barn and the "lean-to" thrust up their laden roofs from the surrounding snow. In front, the cleared ground sloped

away gently to the woods below, a snow-swathed, mystically glimmering expanse, its surface tumbled by the upthrust of the muffled stumps. From the eastern corner of the clearing, directly opposite the doorway before which Dave was standing, the Settlements trail led straight away, a lane of miraculous glory, into the very focus of the sunrise.

For miles upon miles the slow slope of the wilderness was toward the east, so that the trail was like an open gate into the great space of earth and sky. The sky, from the eastern horizon to the zenith — and that was all that Dave Patton had eyes for — was filled with a celestial rabble of rose-pink vapors, thin aerial wisps of almost

unimaginable color. Except the horizon! The horizon, just where the magic portals of the trail revealed it, was an unfathomable radiance of intense, transparent, orange-crimson flame, so thrilling in its strangeness that Dave seemed to feel his spirit striving to draw it in as his lungs were drawing in the vital air. From that fount of living light rushed innumerable streams of thin color, making threads and stains and patches of mystical red among the tops of the lower forest, and dyeing the snowy surface of the clearing with the tints of mother-of-pearl and opal. Dave turned his head to glance at the cabin, the barn, and the woods behind them. All were bathed in that transfiguring

rush of glory. The beauty of it gave him a curious pang, which turned instantly, by some association too obscure for him to trace, into an ache of grief at the disappointment that was hanging over the little one's gaily trusting heart. The fairylike quality of the scene before him made him think, by a mingling of sympathy and far-off, dim remembrance, of the fairy glamour and unreal radiance of beauty that Christmas tree and Christmas toys stood for in the child's bright anticipations. He reminded himself of the glittering delights with which, during the past three Christmases, Lidey's kinsfolk in the Settlement had lovingly surrounded her. Now he, her father, could do nothing to make her Christmas different from

all these other days in whose shut-in monotony she was wearying. Hope, now, and excited wonder, were giving the little one new life. Dave Patton cringed within at the thought of the awakening, the disillusionment, the desolation of sorrow that would come to the baby heart with the dawn of Christmas. He was overwhelmed with self-reproach, because he had not realized all this in time to make provision, before the deep snow had blocked the trail to the Settlement. Now, what *could* he do?

Heavily Dave strode across the yard to the door of the barn. At the sound of his feet crunching the trodden and brittle snow, there came low mooings of eagerness from the expectant cattle in the

barn. As he lifted the massive wooden latch and opened the door, the horse whinnied to him from the innermost stall, there was a welcoming shuffle of hoofs, and a comfortable warmth puffed steamily out in his face. From the horse's stall, from the stanchions of the cattle, big soft eyes all turned to him. As he bundled the scented hay into the mangers, and listened to the contented snortings and puffings as soft muzzles tossed the fodder, he thought how happy these creatures were in their warm security. He thought how happy he was, and his wife, reunited to him after three years of forced and almost continuous separation. For him, and for the young wife, now recovering health in the tonic air of the spruce

land after years of invalidism, this had promised to be a Christmas of unalloyed gladness. To one only, to the little one whose happiness was his continual thought, the day would be dark with the shattering of cherished hopes. The more he thought of it, the more he felt that it was not to be borne. Faint but piteous memories from his own childhood stirred in his brain, and he realized how irremediable, how final and desperate, seem a child's small sorrows. A sudden resolve took hold upon him. This bitterness, at least, his little one should not know. He jammed the pitchfork energetically back into the mow, and left the barn with the quick step of an assured purpose.

Three years before this, Dave

Patton, after a series of misfortunes in the Settlement, which had reduced him to sharp poverty, had been forced to leave his wife and three-year-old baby with her own people, while he betook himself into the remotest wilderness to carve out a new home for them on a tract of forest land which was all that remained of his possessions. The land was fertile and carried good timber; and he had begun to prosper. But his wife's ill health had long made it impossible for her to face the hardships and risks of a pioneer's life two days' journey from the nearest civilization. Not till the preceding spring had Dave dared to bring his family out to the wilderness home that he had so long been making ready for them. Then, however,

it had proved a success. In that high and healing air he had seen the color slowly come back to his wife's pale cheeks; and as for the child, until the great snows came and cut her off from this novel and interesting world, she had been absorbingly happy in the fellowship of the wilderness.

When Dave re-entered the cabin he found the table set over by the window, and his wife beating up the batter for the buckwheat pancakes that she was about to griddle for breakfast. Lidey, still in her little blue-flannel nightgown, but with beaded deerskin moccasins on her tiny feet, and the golden wilfulness of her hair tied back demurely with a blue ribbon, was seated at one end of the table, her

She was inditing an epistle to "Sandy Claus"

eager face half buried in a sheet of paper. She was laboriously inditing, for perhaps the twentieth time, an epistle to "Sandy Claus," telling him what she hoped he would bring her.

If anything had been needed to confirm Dave Patton in his resolve, it was this. From the rapt child his eyes turned and met his wife's inquiring glance.

"I reckon I 've got to go, Mary!" he said quietly. "Think you two kin git along all right fer four or five days? We ain't likely to have no more snow this moon."

The woman let a little sigh escape her, but the look she gave her husband was one of cheerful acquiescence.

"I guess you 're right, dear!

I'll have to let you go, though five days seems an awful long time to be alone here. I've been thinkin' it over," she continued, guarding her words so that Lidey should not understand — "an' I just could n't bear to see it, Dave!"

"That's so!" assented the man. "I'll leave heaps o' wood an' kindlin' cut, an' you 'll jest have to milk an' look after the beasts, dear. Long's you're not *scairt* to be alone, it's all right, I reckon!"

"When 'll you start?" asked the wife, turning to pour the batter in little, sputtering gray-white circles on to the hot greased griddle.

"First thing to-morrow mornin'!" answered Dave, seating himself at the table as the appetizing smell of the browning pancakes

filled the room. "Snow's jest right for snowshoein', an' I'll git back easy Christmas eve."

"You sure won't be late, popsie?" interrupted the child, looking up with apprehension in her round eyes. "I jest wouldn't care one mite for Sandy Claus if you weren't here too!"

"Mebbe I'll git him to give me a lift in his little sleigh! Anyways, I'll be back!" laughed Dave gaily.

II

II

AFTER Dave had gone, setting out at daybreak on his moose-hide snow-shoes, which crunched musically on the hard snow, things went very well for a while at the lonely clearing. It was not so lonely, either, during the bright hours about midday, when the sunshine managed to accumulate something almost like warmth in the sheltered yard. About noon the two red-and-white cows and the yoke of wide-horned red oxen would stand basking in front of the lean-to, near the well, contentedly chewing their cuds. At this time the hens, too, yellow

and black and speckled, would come out and scratch in the litter, perennially undiscouraged by the fact that the only thing they found beneath it was the snow. The vivid crossbills, red and black and white, would come to the yard in flocks, and the quaker-colored snow buntings, and the big, trustful, childlike, pine grosbeaks, with the glowing stain of rose-purple over their heads and necks. These kept Lidey interested, helping to pass the days that now, to her excited anticipations, seemed so long. Perhaps half a dozen times a day she would print a difficult communication to Santa Claus with some new idea, some new suggestion. These missives were mailed to the good Saint of Children by the swift me-

dium of the roaring kitchen fire; and as the draft whisked their scorching fragments upward, Lidey was satisfied that they went straight to their destination. The child's joy in her anticipations was now the more complete, because, since her father's departure, her mother had ceased to discourage her hopes.

On the day before Christmas eve, however, the mother felt symptoms of a return of her old sickness. Immediately she grew anxious, realizing how necessary it was that she should keep well. This nervous apprehension hastened the result that she most dreaded. Her pain and her weakness grew worse hour by hour. Mastered by her memories of what she had been through before, she was in no mood to

throw off the attack. That evening, crawling to the barn with difficulty, she amazed the horse and the cattle by coaxing them to drink again, then piled their mangers with a two days' store of hay, and scattered buckwheat recklessly for the hens. The next morning she could barely drag herself out of bed to light the fire; and Lidey had to make her breakfast—which she did contentedly enough—on bread and butter and unlimited molasses.

It was a weary day for the little one, in spite of her responsibilities. Muffled up and mittened, she was able, under her mother's directions, to carry a little water to the stock in a small tin kettle, making many journeys. And she was able to

Coaxing the horse to drink again

keep the fire going. But the hours crept slowly, and she was so consumed with impatience that all her usual amusements lost their savor. Not even the rare delight of being allowed to cut pictures out of some old illustrated papers could divert her mind from its dazzling anticipations. But before Christmas could come, must come her father; and from noon onward she would keep running to the door every few minutes to peer expectantly down the trail. She was certain that, at the worst, he could not by any possibility be delayed beyond supper-time, for he was needed to get supper—or rather, as Lidey expressed it, to help her get supper for mother! Lidey was not hungry, to be sure, but she was getting

mortally tired of unmitigated bread and butter and molasses.

Supper-time, however, came and went, and no sign of Dave's return. On the verge of tears, Lidey munched a little of the now distasteful food. Her mother, worn out with the pain, which had at last relaxed its grip, fell into a heavy sleep. There was no light in the cabin except the red glow from the open draft of the stove and the intense blue-white moonlight streaming in through the front window. The child's impatience became intolerable.

Flinging open the door for the hundredth time, she gazed out eagerly across the moonlit snow and down the trail. The cloudless moon, floating directly above it,

transfigured that narrow and lonely road into a path to wonderland. In the mystic radiance—blue-white but shot with faint, half-imagined flashes of emerald and violet—Lidey could see no loneliness whatever. The monstrous solitude became to her eyes a garden of silver and crystal. As she gazed, it lured her irresistibly.

With a sudden resolve she noiselessly closed the door, lit the lamp, and began to put on her wraps, stealing about on tiptoe that she might not awaken her mother. She was quite positive that, by this time, her father must be almost home. As her little brain dwelt upon this idea, she presently brought herself to see him striding swiftly along in the moonlight just beyond the turn

of the trail. If she hurried, she could meet him before he came out upon the clearing. The thought possessed her. Stealing a cautious glance at her mother's face to be sure her sleep was sound, she slipped out into the shine. A moment more and her tiny figure, hooded and muffled and mittened, was dancing on moccasined feet across the snow.

At the entrance to the trail, Lidey felt the first qualm of misgiving. The path of light, to be sure, with all its fairy-book enticement, lay straight before her. But the solemn woods, on either side of the path, were filled with great shadows and a terrible stillness. At this point Lidey had half a mind to turn back. But she was

already a young person of positive ideas, not lightly to be swerved from a purpose; and her too vivid imagination still persisted in showing her that picture of her father, speeding toward her just beyond the turn of the trail. She even thought that she could hear his steps upon the daunting stillness. With her heart quivering, yet uplifted by an exaltation of hope, she ran on, not daring to glance again into the woods. To sustain her courage she kept thinking of the look of gay astonishment that would flash into her father's face as he met her running toward him — just around the turn of the trail!

The turn was nearly a quarter of a mile distant, but the child reached it at last. With a little cry

of confident relief she rushed forward. The long trail — now half in shadow from the slight change in its direction — stretched out empty before her. In the excess of her disappointment she burst into tears, and sat down on the snow irresolutely.

Her first impulse — after she had cried for a minute, and wiped her eyes with the little mittens, which promptly stiffened in the stinging frost — was to face about and run for home as fast as she could. But when she turned and glanced behind her, the backward path appeared quite different. When she no longer faced the moonlight, the world took on an unfriendly, sinister look. There were unknown terrors all along that implacable

blue-white way through the dread blackness of the woods. Sobbing with desolation, she turned again toward the moon. Ahead, for all her fears, the trail still held something of the glamour and the dazzle. Ahead, too, as she reminded herself, was surely her father, hastening to meet her, only not quite so near as she had imagined. Summoning back her courage, and comforting her lonely spirit with thoughts of what Santa Claus was going to bring her, she picked herself up and continued her journey at a hurried little walk.

She had not gone more than a few steps when a strange, high sound, from somewhere far behind her, sent her heart into her throat and quickened her pace to a run.

Again came that high, long-

drawn, quavering sound; and the child's heart almost stopped beating. If only she could see her father coming! She had never heard any sound just like that; it was not savage, nor very loud, but somehow it seemed to carry a kind of horror on its floating cadence. It reminded her, very faintly, of the howling of some dogs that she had heard in the Settlement. She was not afraid of dogs. But she knew there were no dogs in the forest.

Just as she was beginning to lose her breath and slacken her pace, that terrible cry came wavering again through the trees, much louder now and nearer. It lent new strength to her tired little feet, and she fled on faster than ever,

her red lips open and her eyes wide. Another slight turn of the trail, and it ran once more directly toward the moon, stretching on and on till it narrowed from sight. And nowhere in the shining track was Dave to be seen. Lidey had now, however, but one thought in her quivering brain, and that was to keep running and get to her father before those dreadful voices could overtake her. She knew they were coming up swiftly. They sounded terribly near. When she had gone about two hundred yards beyond the last bend of the trail, she noticed, a few steps ahead of her, a tiny clearing, and at its farther edge the gable of a little hut rising a couple of feet above the snow. She knew the place. She had played

in it that summer, while Dave was cutting the coarse hay on the clearing. It was a place that had been occupied by lonely trappers and lumber prospectors. Being a work of men's hands it gave the child a momentary sense of comfort, of companionship in the dreadful wild. She paused, uncertain whether to continue along the trail or to seek the shelter of the empty hut.

When the crunching of her own little footsteps stopped, however, she was instantly aware of the padding of other feet behind her. Looking back, she saw a pack of gray beasts just coming around the turn. They were something like dogs. But Lidey knew they were not dogs. She had seen pictures of them — awful pictures. She had

read stories of them which had frozen her blood as she read. Now her very bones seemed to melt within her. They were wolves. For a moment her throat could form no sound. Then, "Father!" she screamed despairingly, and rushed for the hut.

As she reached it the wolves were hardly a dozen paces behind. The door stood half open, but drifted full of snow to within little more than a foot of the top. Into the low opening the child dived head first, like a rabbit, crept behind the door, and fell upon the snow, gasping, too horror-stricken to make any outcry.

A step from the hut door the wolves halted abruptly. The half-buried hut, and the dark hole lead-

ing into it—these were things they did not understand, except that they recognized them as belonging to man. Anything belonging to man was dangerous. In that dark hole they suspected a trap. The leader went up to it, and almost poked his nose into it, sniffing. But he backed away sharply, as if he had met with a blow on the snout, and his nostrils wrinkled in savage enmity. The man smell was strong in the hut. It seemed very like a trap.

Lying flat on her stomach behind the door, Lidey stared out through the narrow crack with eyes that seemed starting from her head. Out there in the clear glitter of the moonlight she saw the wolves go prowling savagely to and fro, and

heard their steps as they cautiously circled the hut, seeking another entrance. They kept about five or six feet distant from it at first, so suspicious were they of that man smell that had greeted the leader's first attempt at investigation. When they had prowled about the hut for several minutes, they all sat down on their haunches before the door, and seemed to deliberate. The child felt their dreadful eyes piercing her through and through, as they searched her out through the crack and penetrated her vain hiding.

Suddenly, while the eyes of all the pack were flaming upon her, she saw the leader come swiftly forward and thrust his fierce snout right against the crack of the door.

In a sort of madness she struck at it with her little mittened hand. The wolf, apparently still disconcerted by the man smell that greeted his nostrils, sprang back warily. Then the whole pack drew a foot or two closer to the open doorway. Ravenous though they were, they were not yet assured that the hut was not a trap. They were not yet quite ready to crawl in and secure their prey. But, gradually, they were edging nearer. A few moments more and the leader, no less crafty than savage, would creep in. Already he had accustomed himself to the menace of that scent. Now he did creep in, as far as the middle of his body, investigating. His red jaws and long white teeth appeared around the edge of the door.

At the sight Lidey's voice returned to her. Shrinking back against the farthest wall, she gave shriek after shriek that seemed to tear the dreadful stillness. In the madness of her terror she hardly noticed that the wolf's head was suddenly withdrawn.

III

III

WHEN Dave Patton set out for the Settlement he found the snow-shoeing so good, the biting air so bracing, and his own heart so light with hope and health, that he was able to make the journey in something less than a day and a half. Out of this time he had allowed himself four hours for sleep, in an old lumber camp beside the trail. At the Settlement, which boasted several miscellaneous stores where anything from a baby's rattle to a bag of fertilizer or a bedroom suite could be purchased, he had no difficulty in gathering such gay-colored trifles, together with more

lasting gifts, as he thought would meet Lidey's anticipations. When he went to see his wife's people, he found that all had something to add to his Santa Claus pack, for Mary as well as for the little one; and he hugged himself with elation at the thought of what a Christmas there was going to be in the lonely wilderness cabin. He had bought two or three things for his wife; and when he shouldered his pack, slinging it high and strapping it close that it might not flop with his rapid stride, he found the burden no light one. But the lightness of his heart made compensation.

That night he took but two hours' sleep in the old lumber camp, aiming to reach home soon after noon. In the morning, however, things

At the Settlement where anything from a baby's rattle
to a bag of fertilizer could be purchased

began to go wrong. First the pack, as packs sometimes will for no visible reason, developed a kink that galled his shoulders obstinately. Again and again he paused, and tried to readjust it. But in vain. Finally, he had to stop, undo the bundle, and rearrange every article in it, before he could induce it to "carry" smoothly.

Half an hour later, as he turned a step off the trail to get a drink at a bubbling spring that kept open all through the bitterest winter, he caught his snow-shoe on a buried branch, and fell forward, breaking the frame. In his angry impatience he attempted no more than a temporary repair of the damage, such as he thought might see him to the end of his journey. But the

poor makeshift broke down before he had gone a mile. There was nothing for him to do but stop long enough to make a good job of it, which he did by chopping out a piece of ash, whittling down a couple of thin but tough strips, and splicing the break securely with the strong "salmon twine" that he always carried. Even so, he realized that to avoid further delay he would have to go cautiously, and humor the mend. And soon he had to acknowledge to himself that it would be long after supper-time, long after Lidey's bedtime, before he could get home.

As the moon rose, he was accompanied by his shadow, a gigantic and grotesque figure that danced fantastically along the snow before

him. As the moon climbed the icy heaven, the shadow shortened, and acquired more sobriety of demeanor. Plodding doggedly onward, too tired to think, Dave amused himself with the antics of the shadow, which seemed responsible for a portion of the crisp music that came from his snow-shoes.

From this careless reverie Dave was suddenly aroused by a ghost of sound that drifted toward him through the trees. It was a long, wailing cry, which somehow stirred the roots of his hair. He did not recognize it. But he felt that it was nothing human. It came from somewhere between himself and home, however; and he instinctively quickened his steps, thinking with satisfaction of the snug and well-

warmed cabin that sheltered his dear ones.

Presently the long cry sounded again, nearer and clearer now, and tremulous. Dave had heard wolves before, in Labrador and in the West. Had he not been quite sure that wolves were unknown in this part of the country, he would have sworn that the sound was the hunting cry of a wolf-pack. But the idea was impossible. He had no sooner made up his mind to this, however, than the cry was repeated once more. Thereupon Dave reluctantly changed his mind. That the sound meant wolves was not only possible, but certain. It filled him with resentment to think that those ravening marauders had come into the country.

It was soon manifest to Dave's initiated ears that the wolves were coming directly toward him. But he gathered, too, that they were in pursuit of some quarry. Dave had the Eastern woodsman's contempt for wolves, unless in a very large pack; and he soon decided that this pack was a small one. He did not think that it would dare to face him. Nevertheless, he recognized the remote possibility of their being so hungry as to forget their dread of man. That in such case his axe would be an all-sufficient defence he did not doubt. But he was in a fierce hurry to get home. He did not want to be stopped and forced into any fight. For a moment he thought of turning off through the woods, and giving these night for-

agers a wide berth. Then he remembered his uncertain snow-shoes. The snow would be very soft off the trail, and there would be the chance of breaking the shoe again. Who was he, to be turned out of his path by a bunch of wild curs? It was the snow-shoe that settled it. He set his jaws grimly, unslung his axe, and pressed forward. The clamor of the pack was now so near and loud that it quite drowned one single piercing cry of "Father" that would otherwise have reached his ears. There was a new note in the howling, too, which Dave's ear interpreted as meaning that the quarry was in sight. Then the noise stopped abruptly save for an impatient yelp or two.

"Whatever it be they're after, it's took to cover," said Dave to himself. "An' in the old shanty, too!" he added, as he saw the little patch of clearing open before him.

Realizing that the wolves had something to occupy fully their attention, he now crept noiselessly forward just within the edge of the wood. Peering forth from behind the cover of a drooping hemlock branch, he saw the roof of the hut, the half-open doorway nearly choked with snow, and the wolves prowling and sniffing around it, but keeping a couple of yards away.

"Scairt of a trap!" he thought to himself, with a grin; and cursed his luck that he had not his rifle with him.

"A couple o' them thick gray pelts," he thought—"what a coat they'd make for the little one!"

There were six wolves, and big ones—enough to make things look pretty ugly for one man with only an axe. Dave was glad they had something to keep them from turning their attention to him. He watched them for a few moments, then decided to go around by the other side of the clearing and avoid trouble.

He drew back as silently as a lynx. Where the woods overhead were thick, the snow was soft, with no crispness on the surface; and instead of the crunching that his steps made on the trail, here the snow made no sound under his feet but a sort of thick sigh.

Dave had taken several paces in retreat, when an idea flashed up that arrested him. *Why* were the wolves so wary about entering the hut, when their quarry was certainly inside? Their dread of a trap was not, of itself, quite enough to explain their caution. The thought gave him a qualm of uneasiness. He would return, and have another look at them! Then his impatience got the better of him. Mary and the little one were waiting and watching for him at home. He retreated another pace or two. What should he be doing, wasting his time over a parcel of wolves that had got a fox cornered in the old shanty? Dave felt sure it was a fox. But no! He could not escape the conviction — much as he

wished to — that if the fugitive were a fox, or any other animal of the Northeastern woods, it would not take six hungry wolves much more than six seconds to get over their suspicions and go in after him. What if it should be some half-starved old Indian, working his way in to the Settlement after bad luck with his hunting and his trapping? Whoever it was, he had no gun, or there would have been shooting before this. Dave saw that he must go back and look into the matter. But he was angry at this new delay. Cursing the wolves, and the Indian who didn't know enough to take care of himself, Dave stole back to his covert behind the hemlock branch, and peered forth once more, no longer interested, but aggrieved.

The wolves were now sitting on their haunches around the hut door. Their unusual behavior convinced him that there was a man inside. Well, there was no getting around the fact that he was in for a fight. He only hoped that the chap inside was some good, and would have "'somethin' to say fer himself, darn him!" Dave gently lowered the bundle from his back, and threw off his thick coat to allow his arms freer play.

It was at this moment that the leader of the pack made up his mind to crawl into the hut.

As the wolf's head entered the low opening, Dave gripped his axe, thrust aside the hemlock branch, and silently darted forth into the clearing. He did not shout, for

he wanted to take his enemies, as far as possible, unawares. He had but a score of yards to go. So intent were they upon their leader's movements that Dave was almost upon them ere they heeded the sound of his coming. Then they looked around. Three shrank back, startled at the tall and threatening shape. But two sprang at his throat, with snapping jaws. The first met the full sweep of his axe in the chest, and dropped in a heap. The second dodged a short blow, and warily drew back again. Then —from within the darkness of the hut came those screams of the madness of terror.

For one beat Dave's heart stopped. He knew the voice.

The big wolf was just backing

out. He turned, jerking himself around like a loosed spring, as he saw Dave towering over him. But he was not in time. The axe descended, sheering his haunches across, and he stretched out, working his great jaws convulsively. Dave saw that the jaws had no blood upon them, and his own blood returned to his heart. He had come in time. The screams within the hut died into piteous sobs.

Across Dave's mind flamed a vision of the agony of horror that Lidey had been suffering since first those howlings fell upon his ears. His heart-break transformed itself into a mad rage of vengeance. As he turned, with a hoarse shout, upon the rest of the pack, he felt

a hot breath on his neck, and bare fangs snapped savagely within an inch of his throat. His assailant sprang back in time to escape the deadly sweep of the axe, but at the same instant the other three were leaping in. One of these caught a glancing blow, which drove him off, snarling. But the other two were so close that there was no time for Dave to recover. Instinctively he jabbed a short back-stroke with the end of the axe-handle, and caught one of his assailants in the belly. Sickened, and daunted by this unexpected form of reprisal, the brute hunched itself with a startled yelp and ran off with its tail between its legs. At the same moment, dropping the axe, Dave caught the other wolf fairly by the throat.

The gripping hand was a kind of weapon that the beast had never learned to guard against, and it was taken at a disadvantage. With a grunt of fury and of effort Dave closed his grip inexorably, braced himself, and swung the heavy brute off its feet. Whirling it clear around his head, he let go. The animal flew sprawling and twisting through the air, and came down on its back ten feet away. When it landed, there was no more fight left in it. Before Dave could reach it with his axe it was up and away in a panic after its two remaining fellows.

Breathing heavily from his effort and from the storm of emotion still surging in his breast, Dave turned to the hut door, and called:

"Lidey! Lidey! Are you there?"

"Popsie! Oh, popsie *dear!* I thought you were n't goin' to come!" cried a quivering little voice. And the child crept out into the moonlight.

"Oh, popsie," she sobbed, hiding her eyes in his neck as he crushed her to his heart, "they were goin' to eat me up, an' I thought you would n't come!"

IV

IV

WITH the bundle on his back and Lidey in his arms, Dave strode homeward, his weariness forgotten. His first anxiety about his wife was somewhat eased when he learned that Lidey had left her asleep; for he remembered that a heavy sleep always marked the end of one of her attacks. He only hoped that the sleep would hold her until they got home, for his heart sank at the thought of her terror if she should wake and find Lidey gone. As they came out on the edge of the clearing, and saw that all was quiet in the cabin, Dave said:

"We won't tell mother nothin' about the wolves to-night, sweetie, eh? It 'ld jest git her all worked up, an' she couldn't stand it when she's sick. We won't say nothin' about that till to-morrow!"

"Yes," murmured Lidey, "she'd be awful scairt!"

They were just about half-way up the slope when from the cabin came a frightened cry of "Lidey! Lidey!" The door was flung open, the lamplight streamed out in futile contest with the moonlight, and Mrs. Patton appeared. Her face was white with fear. As she saw Dave and the little one hurrying toward her, both hands went to her heart in the extremity of her relief, and she sank back into a chair before the door.

Dave kicked off his snow-shoes with a dexterous twist, stepped inside, slammed the door, and with a laugh and a kiss deposited Lidey in her mother's lap.

"She jest run down to meet me!" explained Dave truthfully, but deceptively.

"Oh, girlie, how you frightened me!" cried the woman, divided between tears and smiles. "I woke up, Dave, an' found her gone, an' bein' kind o' bewildered I couldn't understand it!"

She clung to his hand, while he looked tenderly down into her face.

"Poor little woman," he murmured, "you've had a bad turn ag'in, Lidey tells me. Better now, eh?"

"I'm plumb all right ag'in, Dave,

now you're back," she answered, squeezing his hand hard. "But land's sakes, Dave, how ever did you git all that blood on your pants?"

"Oh," said the man lightly, "that's nothin'. Tell you about it bime-by. I'm jest starvin' now. Let's have supper quick, and then give old Mr. Sandy Claus a chance. To-morrow we're goin' to have the greatest Christmas ever was, us three!"

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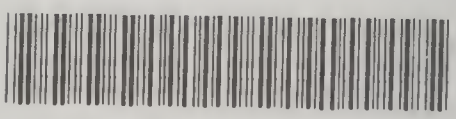

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